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XVI.—THE LATER MANNER OF MR. HENRY JAMES

Those who have doubts as to how far Mr. James has travelled from his earlier style will find interesting testimony in a bit of early criticism. Writing of *The Passionate Pilgrim* and *Transatlantic Sketches* J. C. Heywood says,¹ “Ambiguities and obscurities, as well as inadequacies of expression, are so uncommon in these books that those which appear are all the more displeasing and inexcusable, since the writer has plainly shown that they might have been avoided.”

Even the most ardent admirers of Mr. James to-day will, I think, admit that they have to work at times to grasp his meaning. To most of us, the fact that it should ever have been possible to speak of ambiguities and obscurities as “uncommon” with him, comes with a little shock of surprise. The object of this paper will be, not to show that his style *has* become more involved and less clear; for it seems to me that the attitude of the present-day public and critics, as compared with the earlier critic just quoted, sufficiently establishes this; but to discover, if possible, some of the causes for this loss of clearness, and to decide whether there is any compensating gain.

Mr. James has made a comparison of his earlier and later ways of doing things rather easier by bringing out, recently, a complete revised edition of his works. In order to get at the subject as definitely as possible, I have selected three or four representative books, and read them side by side in the two editions, noting any changes which seemed to me significant. I shall give the result

¹ *How They Strike me, These Authors*, Philadelphia, 1877.

of this examination first, before discussing in a more general way the development of his style judged from his work as a whole.

I took first *Roderick Hudson*, which Mr. James speaks of in his introduction to the new edition as his first attempt at a real novel, a long and sustained piece of work. He looks at it, apparently, with a sort of pity and patronage, as filled with crudities which he regrets, and yet with fondness, too, as one of his earliest inspirations. To the average reader, unlearned in the James cult, the book would perhaps appeal more than any of his others. The story is simple and direct; there is plenty of action—not merely talk about states of consciousness—and the problem is not too deep for a mind untrained in psychology to grapple with. Mr. James says that Roderick's disintegration is too rapid, but I cannot feel that he is right. An "artistic temperament" of that sort, as it goes up with a leap, comes down with a rush; and the very essence of Roderick's character is his incapacity to realize any other point of view than that of his own capricious mood, his utter lack of any impulse to pull himself together. The other characters, even those lightly sketched, interest us. Perhaps Mr. James has never created a more fascinating woman than Christina Light. Her indifference, her beauty, her cleverness masking as *naïveté*, all tantalize the reader as they did her fellow-personages in the story. We are not merely told of her power; we feel it. As for the style of the earlier edition, if we were asked to judge it, not knowing the author, we should probably say that it had no very marked peculiarities. It is straightforward, without excessive use of figures, but rich in apt and expressive phrases. It does not thrust itself upon our

notice; our attention is held by the events and emotions portrayed, not by the medium of portrayal. In reading the later version, on the contrary, I found myself, after some sentence which meant nothing to me, turning back to the earlier text to find out what the author really intended to say. The clean, clear-cut lines have been blurred in the revising; the apt word has been replaced by a roundabout phrase which may be to Mr. James himself more accurate expression, but which often seems to be used only because it is less natural. He has tried to amplify, but one feels often that he has succeeded only in diluting.

One of the changes which strike us as showing a lapse of vigor, as well as, frequently, a loss of clearness, is the substitution of a general word or phrase for a particular. This is still more common in the later work, but it is noticeable even in this revision. For instance, the earlier text has "It would have made him almost sick, however, to think that on the whole Roderick was not a generous fellow." In revising, Mr. James makes this "It would have made him quite sick, however, to think that on the whole the values in such a spirit were not much larger than the voids." "A transparent brown eye" becomes "a transparent brown regard." Where in the first book we are told that Roderick "looked at the straining oarsmen and the swaying crowd with the eye of a sculptor," the second version has him look "with the eye of an artist and of the lover of displayed life." This last phrase is vague enough to make one ponder a bit; at all events, it does not express with finality what the author apparently wanted to say—that Roderick saw everything in relation to the plastic art.

Another form of change is the substitution, for the

natural and ordinary word, of one which is commonly used in a rather different sense, as "I shall be better *beguiled*" for "I shall be better entertained." I must confess that on reading "She had already had a long colloquy with the French chambermaid, who had published her views on the Roman question," I was dense enough to feel for a moment slightly bewildered at the learning of French chambermaids, and was relieved, on referring to the other book, to find that she merely "expounded" her views.

We find some of Mr. James's later favorites of expression creeping in. For "another man admired her," he puts "another man is in a state about her"; and instead of "she went on with soft earnestness" we have "she wonderfully kept it up." Just how we should classify these phrases, it is hard to say. "In a state" might be looked upon as another example of the general for the particular, and as for *wonderfully* and *beautifully*, Mr. James seems to keep them ready to put in whenever some other adverb is not absolutely demanded.

He makes a considerable point of inversion in sentence structure, having the theory, evidently, that to put a word out of its natural place is to call attention to it. This, of course, is an obvious fact, but in some cases there seems to be no particular reason for such emphasis. For instance, "she said dryly" conveys just about the same degree of meaning as "she dryly said." In conversation, especially; the inversion strikes one as decidedly unnatural. "Go and get me a piece of bread" certainly has the ring of colloquialism more than "get me somewhere a piece of bread."

The mention of colloquialism brings us to a rather notable phase of Mr. James's later manner, his seeming

attempt to approach the forms of conversational English. This is shown in the increased use of abbreviations,—“he’s,” instead of *he is*, “haven’t,” for *have not*, and so forth—and in the frequency of parentheses. This parenthetical construction is certainly not a step in the direction of clearness, especially since a good deal of unrelated matter is often packed into the parentheses. The colloquial aim is displayed in the bits of slang which we find introduced, not always with entire appropriateness. Christina, instead of “Do you think he’s going to be a great man?”, says in the second version, “Do you think he’s going to be a real swell, a big celebrity?” We find “How could I ever meet her again if at the end of it all she should be unhappy?” replaced by “if at the end of it all she should find herself short?”

The question of foreign influence on Mr. James interests me, much. We know his admiration of Balzac, and his fondness for Continental settings. I seem to have found several instances where the French idiom has impressed itself upon his construction. In the early text he has “It is still lotus-eating; only you sit down at a table, and the lotuses are served up on rococo china.” The later has “always” in place of *still*—a clear reminiscence, it would seem, of the French *toujours*. Christina says, “She’s capable of thinking that, mamma,” using *mamma* not as a noun of address, but as a Frenchman would say, “Elle est capable de penser cela, la mère!” For “paying, to Rowland’s knowledge, his first compliment,” we have later, “acquitting himself, to Rowland’s knowledge, of his first public madrigal.” This is not the ordinary English use of the word *acquit*; it is, exactly, the use of the French *s’acquitter de*. In “It won’t be a tragedy, simply because I sha’n’t assist at it,” where *assist*

at replaces "I sha'n't survive it," "assist" is used as the French use *assister*, in the sense of witnessing, being present.

The actual use of foreign words and phrases is much more frequent in the later text. We have Christina called a *brava ragazza* instead of a "good girl." Where, in the early version, "Roman princes come and bow to her," in the later, "*les grands de la terre* come and do her homage." "He examined the new statue, said it was very promising," becomes "Pronounced it tremendously *trouvé*." Exclamations like, "Dieu sait pourquoi!" and "Che vuole?" are fairly abundant. It is strange that a writer like Mr. James, who seeks not vulgar popularity but the following of a cultivated few, should have fallen into a practice which the cheaper class of novelists has always delighted in. It is true that his French and Italian words are correct in form and aptly used; it is true, also, that there are cases when only a French or an Italian word will express the shade of meaning he is attempting to give. But there are many cases where the foreign word is absolutely unnecessary, and only serves to confuse a reader who is not familiar with the language. There surely was no excuse for changing the statement that Roderick had no fixed day to "no fixed *jour*."

There are some cases where the English idiom is faulty. We should naturally say *get to work*, when Mr. James says "get *at work*," and one would hardly understand the question, "Are they already *giving on* his nerves?" if it were not for the earlier form, "Is he already tired of them?"

Frequently we find examples of what I have called "dilution," where the author, in his desire, apparently, to explain fully and precisely every turn of his thought,

has weakened the effect by putting in too much. When Roderick, in an argument about his work, says, "My America shall answer you," there is a certain nobility in his self-assurance. But when Mr. James writes, "My colossal 'America' shall answer you," he spoils it by trying to put into black and white the bigness of Roderick's conception. At the very last of the book, in the description of Rowland's relations with Mary, we have in the first edition an admirable directness: "During the dreary journey back to America, made, of course, with his assistance, there was a great frankness in her gratitude, a great gratitude in her frankness." In the second, the description finishes, more vaguely, with "she had used him, with the last rigour of consistency, as a character definitely appointed to her use."

One very noticeable thing in the later books of Mr. James is that all his people talk alike. There is almost no attempt at differentiation through characteristic talk. Naturally, then, in the revision, we find speeches changed to more typical "James dialect," regardless of the speaker. This is especially true in the case of Roderick's mother. A timid, elderly lady from a little New England town, thoroughly refined, thoroughly innocent, thoroughly provincial, she remarks in the early text, naturally and characteristically, "But we are very easy now, are we not, Mary?" The corrected form, "Now, however, we are quite ourselves, and Mary, I think, is really enjoying the revulsion" does not belong to Mrs. Hudson at all, but to some lofty lady in perfect control of her situation. She would never have thought of saying, "No wonder he found Northampton mild"; but the first form, "No wonder he found Northampton dull," might easily have suggested itself to her. When we come to changing "To think

of her being a foreigner! She speaks so beautifully" into "She speaks the language as if she were driving her own carriage—and with her whip well up in her hand, don't you think?" we have something hopelessly out of character. This is not Mrs. Hudson, or anybody else, except Mr. James.

Roderick, looking at his own work, says, "I think it is curiously bad," and this amount of detachment, in the mood he is in, is not unnatural. But he would not have said, "I think it curiously, almost interestingly bad"—he was too excited to weigh his words so carefully. The omission of the verb, too, is hardly colloquial.

There are some passages in which no definite fault can be found with the new form of expression except perhaps some slight awkwardness or vagueness that makes it less effective than the old. So, "Her daughter had come lawfully by her loveliness," in the old—"Her young companion was therefore accountably fair," in the new. "Let me model you, and he who can may marry you" loses in becoming "Let me be your modeller, and he who can may be your husband." "You almost come up to one of my dreams" is weaker than "You almost satisfy my conception of the beautiful."

Roderick Hudson was written in 1874. We could find many imperfections in it, no doubt, but I must confess that I cannot see where the revision of 1908 has improved the original. In almost every case, where I have compared the two versions, I have preferred the earlier form.

The Portrait of a Lady is to me one of the finest of modern novels. For its sake, I can forgive Mr. James much:—I can even, temporarily, forget the perplexity and irritation he frequently causes me. I could not have forgiven him, had he laid very violent hands upon it. But

he himself has evidently realized the power of his early work, and has tampered comparatively little with the expression. In the introduction he calls the book "a structure reared with an 'architectural competence' as Turgenieff would have said, that makes it, to the author's own sense, the most proportioned of his works after *The Ambassadors*,—which was to follow it so many years later, and which has, no doubt, a superior roundness." He accounts for this successful building of the story by the fact that he has placed the center of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness. Certainly Isabel is, throughout, the center of interest, and we get into her personality, have a more human approach to her than to most of Mr. James's people.

There are comparatively few foreign words in the story, though so much of the action takes place in Italy. We have *simpatico* instead of nice; *carrière* for career; "You wouldn't at all have the *tenue*," replacing "You would make a very poor butler." "He's Mr. Osborne who lives in Italy" is enlarged by foreign phrasing to "who lives *tout bêtement* in Italy." The influence of this last idiom is seen in English, when we have "the letter that she carried in her pocket all sufficiently reminded her,"—the first expression having merely *sufficiently*.

One or two new tendencies can be noticed in this revision. Mr. James has a way of piling up adverbs, regardless of sound—"At present, obviously, nevertheless." The earlier construction, "But at present, obviously," is superior both in clearness and in harmony. He is inclined to use unusual, if not entirely original compounds, as, "he had no intention of disamericanizing," for "he had no intention of turning Englishman." Figures are used more freely, and they are often rather

far-fetched ; we feel that the author must have strained his imagination to see a comparison. For example, the statement, " She was much excited, but she wished to resist her excitement," becomes " She found herself now humming like a smitten harp. She only asked, however, to put on the cover, to case herself again in brown holland." The elaboration of detail here gives a rather ludicrous effect. Again, " every now and then Isabel heard the Countess say something extravagant " is expanded into " heard the Countess, at something said by her companion, plunge into the latter's lucidity as a poodle splashes after a thrown stick." " A certain fund of indolence that he possessed " is elaborated by the addition of what seems an utterly unrelated figure, " a secret hoard of indifference —like a thick cake a fond old nurse might have slipped into his first school outfit."

There is the same substitution of the general for the particular which we have observed in *Roderick Hudson*. Sometimes it seems to be done with some intention of humor, as " Miss Stackpole's ocular surfaces unwinkingly caught the sun," for " Miss Stackpole's brilliant eyes expanded still further,"—but the humor is certainly not very apparent. It is hard to see how anyone could have changed " shaking his hunting-whip with little quick strokes " into " still agitating, in his mastered emotion, his implement of the chase." And it is simply inconceivable how a man of artistic power could substitute for the simple directness of the first passage following, the vague wanderings of the second. " To see a strong man in pain had something terrible for her, and she immediately felt very sorry for her visitor." " This immediately had a value—classic, romantic, redeeming, what did she know?—for her, ' the strong man in pain '

was one of the categories of the human appeal, little charm as he might exert in the given case."

Speaking of Rome, Isabel asks, in the first version, with perfect naturalness, "Ought I to dislike it, because it's spoiled?" In the second, her question, "Ought I to dislike it because, poor old dear—the Niobe of Nations, you know—it has been spoiled?" gives us the idea of a person who is tucking in scraps of learning to make an impression—an idea which is not at all the conception Isabel's creator wants us to have of her.

Since I remarked on the first appearance of favorite words and phrases in the other book, perhaps comment should be made on the expression, "she vaguely wailed," which is used here in place of "she murmured to herself," and which occurs rather frequently in the later books, sometimes in connection with situations that would seem to give no real cause for wailing. Mr. James seems to develop a fondness for adverbs. His description of Isabel as "thin and light, and middling tall" becomes "she was undeniably spare, and ponderably light, and proverbially tall." The adverbs here have an argumentative tone which seems a trifle unnecessary.

On the whole, *The Portrait of a Lady*, begun in the spring of 1879, shows a decided advance in structure and in finish over *Roderick Hudson*, of some five years before. This is probably the reason why Mr. James looked at it in a less critical mood, and made fewer changes, though it is not much nearer than the earlier book to the complication of his later style.

When we turn to *The Awkward Age*, which Mr. Brownell¹ has pronounced "the technical masterpiece

¹ *American Prose Masters*, New York, 1909.

among the later works," we make a jump of some twenty years, as this book was not published till 1899. The comparative lateness of the work is very evident when we see how closely the original and the revised edition keep to each other. Only a trifling change, here and there, is to be noted. The figures are somewhat more elaborated, and usually less effective, in the later version. "She shows things, don't you see? as some great massive wall shows placards and posters"—loses much of its force when it is changed to "as some fine tourist region shows the placards in the fields and the posters on the rocks." There is the tendency noted before, to destroy the aptness of the figure by adding too much incongruous detail. We find foreign idiom, as in "I see you coming," meaning "I see what you're driving at." There is still less attempt than in the first edition to suit the speech to the character. Mr. Longdon, a gentleman of the old school, would be far more likely to say, "Kindly give me some light then on the condition into which he has plunged you," than "Kindly give me a lead then as to what it is he has done to you." When Mr. James tells us that "Mr. Cashmore soundlessly glared his amusement," he seems to have tried desperately hard to find a roundabout way of saying, "Mr. Cashmore stared."

The book, in the 1899 edition, shows all the characteristics of what we have been calling Mr. James's "later manner." We have, every few pages, such expressions as, "of a strangeness," "of a profundity." These, by the way, are themselves French idioms, and so give evidence of the foreign influence already mentioned. The author's fondness for unusual adverbs, and his habit of putting them before the verb, are very noticeable,—for instance, "he robustly reflected." The book is full of

parentheses, not merely in the talk of the characters, but in the author's comment, and he is constantly throwing in interjectional phrases like, "don't you know?", "don't you see?", and his much-worked expression, "There you are." There is an increasing use of the pronoun "one"—for *you* or for the definite pronoun of the third person.

The Golden Bowl, published in 1904, is so near the time of the revision, that it is hardly worth while to compare the two versions. It will be more to the point to look for developments in this as compared with the earlier work.

We find several new examples of foreign idioms. "Before twelve assistants only" has the French meaning of *assistants*, as spectators. In "But from the moment you didn't do it for the complications, why shouldn't you have rendered them?"—"from the moment" is evidently used with the meaning of *since*, in exact equivalent of the French *du moment que*. We have the *toujours* again in "she always confessed," "she always went on," referring not to an habitual action but to one continued. "I see them never come back. But *never*—simply." Here "but" is used as the French would say *mais jamais*.

The piling up of adverbs becomes more marked still. "She couldn't of course however be at the best as much in love with his discovery." Not merely adverbial phrases are treated in this way, but we find sentences made up of a string of loose words and phrases. "They didn't, indeed, poor dears, know what, in that line—the line of futility—the real thing meant." There seems to be some intention here of reproducing the natural gambling of conversation, the tacking on of thoughts as they develop, but it seems to me that Mr. James's parenthetical structure does not really reproduce conversation. We do

string our thoughts together in a more or less rambling fashion, but most of us talk in loose sentences instead of periodic.

In this book we find grammatical peculiarities which sometimes amount to positive incorrectness. One thing is the use of the double negative, as in "She did it ever, inevitably, infallibly—she couldn't possibly not do it." I suppose this is, according to strict logic, correct, although it is a trifle confusing, and to most of us it would be more natural to say, "she couldn't help doing it." The same thing is seen in "I can't not ask myself; I can't not ask you," and in "he hadn't for a good while done anything more conscious and intentional than not quickly to take leave."

But such a sentence as "with the sense moreover of what he saw her see he had the sense of what she saw him" is not only hopelessly obscure; it seems grammatically incomplete. So in "She admitted accordingly that she was educative—which Maggie was so aware that she herself inevitably wasn't"—the relative refers, incorrectly, to an adjective. "Each appears, under our last possible analysis, to have wished to make the other feel that they were" is a slip that Mr. James should not have been guilty of; and "Their lips sought their lips," referring to two people, is hardly accurate. There are several cases of the adjective used like an adverb, to modify another adjective, as, "modest scattered," "slim sinuous and strong."

The book throughout is vague in expression. We feel as if we were groping in a fog, and a bit of Mr. James's typically sketchy conversation sums up our sensations at the end:

"Then do you yourself know?"

'How much?—'

'How much.'

'How far?—'

'How far.'

Fanny had appeared to wish to make sure, but there was something she remembered in time, and even with a smile. 'I've told you before that I know absolutely nothing.'

'Well—that's what *I* know,' said the Princess."

This elliptical style of conversation is of course meant to be suggestive, and it sometimes fulfills its purpose admirably, but often it irritates us by completely failing to suggest. We feel like echoing the remark of one of the characters, "Everything's remarkably pleasant, isn't it?—but *where* for it after all are we?"

Mr. Howells, unwaveringly loyal to the novelist who in an earlier time was so often classed with him, asserts¹ that though he sometimes cannot understand, he trusts Mr. James, and feels that he will write nothing which is not worth understanding. I should not wish to be less modest than Mr. Howells, but I would humbly protest that, if I can read Balzac, whom Mr. James owns as his master, with a fair degree of comprehension, Mr. James ought to be able to make me understand at least as well, writing in my native tongue. I had thought at first that the same thing might be true of Mr. James's later work that the critics have found in Shakespeare's later plays—he might have had too much thought for his expression, have tried to pack too much in a single sentence. But, as we have seen from the investigation, he has more frequently *thinned* a passage than enriched it; he has packed in more expression rather than more thought.

¹ "Mr. Henry James's Later Work," *North American Review*, January, 1903.

Part of the vagueness of the style undoubtedly comes from the detachment which Mr. Brownell speaks of as characteristic of Mr. James, his habit of "passing the story to the reader through the mind of one of the personages in it." Mr. James himself, in one of his introductions, speaks of presenting the story "not as my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but as my account of somebody's impression of it." Again, in *The Figure in the Carpet*, he says, "Literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life." This deliberate reasoning seems to show once more a certain aloofness of attitude. With the very greatest writers, do we not feel that there are fewer removals, that literature means, quite directly, life?

And yet, in spite of this device of making some character the spokesman, although, as Mr. Brownell says, "we see him busily getting out of the way, visibly withdrawing behind the screen of the story making of his work, in fine, a kind of elaborate and complicated fortification between us and his personality," we are left at the end thinking not of what the people in the story have said or done, but of how Mr. Henry James has expressed himself. It may be that his mannerisms have grown up in an honest attempt to communicate subtle shades of thought; but it certainly seems, often, that when two forms of expression are possible, he deliberately chooses the less natural and the more awkward. Mr. Howells speaks of "that wonderful way of Mr. James by which he imparts a fact without stating it, approaching it again and again, without actually coming into contact with it." This is pretty good description, only most of us feel that there are many times when he approaches a fact again and again but does not impart it.

Mr. Brownell says, "Cuvier lecturing on a single bone and reconstructing the entire skeleton from it is naturally impressive, but Mr. James often presents the spectacle of a Cuvier absorbed in the positive fascinations of the single bone itself,—yet plainly preserving the effect of a Cuvier the while." This phrases very satisfactorily to me the feeling I had in reading *The Ambassadors*. There was so much talk about so little; the people and the situation had so little appeal to one's sympathy; the language, at times, was so hesitating and elusive; and yet, somehow, the whole thing was masterly. We can only regretfully wonder what the world of literature might have gained if Mr. James had kept along the road to which *The Portrait of a Lady* pointed, instead of turning off into the manneristic byways that have led to *The Sacred Fount* and *The Golden Bowl*.

I said in the beginning that we should ask the question whether there has been any gain to make up for the loss of clearness that we have traced in Mr. James's work.

Stevenson says, "That style is the most perfect, not, as fools say, which is most natural, for the most natural is the disjointed babble of the chronicler; but which attains the highest degree of elegant and pregnant implication unobtrusively, or, if obtrusively, then with the greatest gain to sense and vigor." Mr. James's style—that is, the later style—is certainly not unobtrusive; and I think only the most extreme of his supporters would affirm that the increase in obtrusiveness has meant a gain in sense and vigor. If, as some of them seem to think, he *must* write in this way to express the windings of his thought, it would seem to the uninitiated that there must be something wrong with the thought. In any case, the question may well arise whether a mode of writing which so con-

stantly distracts attention from the substance to the form of expression is still to be called *style*. Certainly not according to Goethe's definition,¹ which Mr. Brownell seems to have had in mind when he said:² "Are the masterpieces of the future to be written in this fashion? If they are, they will differ from the masterpieces of the past in the substitution of a highly idiosyncratic *manner* for the hitherto essential element of *style*, and in consequence they will require a second reading, not as heretofore, for the discovery of new beauties or the savoring again of old ones, but to be understood at all."

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¹ *Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil* (1787).

² *Op. cit.*